

The Interpretation of Postcolonialism: Gains and Losses in the Construction of Chinese Discourse in the “Third Space” of the English Translation of *From the Soil— The Foundations of Chinese Society*

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Abstract:

The wave of postcolonialism has provided a unique perspective for the cultural turn in translation studies. In the postcolonial context, translation is no longer a mere activity of semantic conversion but a battleground for power relations. Against the backdrop of the current strategy to promote Chinese culture globally, it is imperative to implement effective strategies to ensure that Chinese discourse can be effectively constructed and strengthened in interactions with dominant cultures. The “third space” created through the interaction of different cultures serves as the best arena for translators to deconstruct cultural hegemony and construct cultural discourse. This paper focuses on the English translation of Fei Xiaotong’s classic work *From the Soil—The Foundations of Chinese Society—The Foundations of Chinese Society*, using postcolonial “third space” theory, explores the gains and losses in constructing Chinese discourse within the translation. The study points out that through methods such as multiple translations of a single term, transliteration with paraphrasing, the construction of China English, and annotation, the translator achieved certain successes in constructing Chinese discourse. However, problems also exist, including inappropriate omissions, factual errors, and incorrect emotional connotations of certain terms, which led to some deviations in the transmission of Chinese discourse in the target culture. This paper aims to provide a reference for constructing Chinese discourse in a postcolonial context and to enhance the influence of Chinese culture in the global stage.

Keywords: Postcolonialism; *From the Soil—The Foundations of Chinese Society—The Foundations of Chinese Society*; Third Space; Construction of Chinese Discourse.

1. Introduction

From the discovery of the Americas in the 15th century to the peak of the British Empire and the decolonization movement in the mid-20th century, colonialism has had a profound impact on global political structures, economic development, and cultural dissemination. Consequently, postcolonialism emerged as a new theoretical perspective, focusing on the influence of colonialism and imperialism on Third World countries[1-2]. By virtue of western colonial history and imperialist legacies, postcolonialism critically examines and reflects on the oppression and exploitation that colonized nations experienced in political, economic, and social domains. It also explores the complex power relations and cultural exchanges between colonizers and the colonized.

Translation, as a cross-linguistic and cross-cultural activity, in the postcolonial context, is not merely a tool for linguistic conversion but also a battleground for the continuation and contestation of power relations. Postcolonial translation theory seeks to analyze the mechanisms of power reproduction and resistance within the translation process, revealing how translation serves or opposes colonialism. It no longer pursues equivalence and emphasizes the subversive role of the translated text in the target culture[3]. An important direction in postcolonial translation studies is the construction of Chinese discourse. Chinese discourse refers to a system of terms, concepts, and articles that reflect Chinese characteristics[4]. In today's strategic context of promoting Chinese culture globally, adopting appropriate strategies to amplify the voice of Chinese discourse in interactions with dominant cultures is a necessity of the times. The postcolonial theory of „Third Space“ provides a framework for studying the construction of Chinese discourse. This theory emphasizes that the source culture and the target culture do not exist in simple opposition during translation but instead coexist and merge through an interactive and dynamic space, in which the translator constructs cultural discourse within the “Third Space.”

Fei Xiaotong's *From the Soil—The Foundations of Chinese Society* is an important work in the fields of sociology and anthropology, both in China and globally. In this book, Fei provides an in-depth analysis of the unique structure and cultural forms of rural Chinese society. He introduces the key concept of the „differential mode of association“, explains interpersonal relationships and social hierarchies in rural society, and emphasizes the central role of family and clan in the social structure. Additionally, Fei discusses the role of rural culture in maintaining social stability and examines issues such as order and legal concepts in rural society, as well as the impact of

modernization on rural life. The English translation of this work by Gary G. Hamilton and Wang Zheng brings the essence of China's rural culture to the world stage within a globalized context. Therefore, this paper takes the English translation of *From the Soil—The Foundations of Chinese Society* as its object of study, examining how Chinese discourse is constructed within the „Third Space“ and exploring how this translation practice, in a postcolonial context, successfully disseminates Chinese culture while also encountering challenges of cultural distortion. The goal is to provide insights into deconstructing cultural hegemony and constructing Chinese discourse within a postcolonial framework.

2. A Review of Postcolonial Theory

In the latter half of the 20th century, with the rise of postcolonial theory, translation was redefined as a field where culture is represented and power relations intertwine. The development of postcolonial translation theory has evolved from a critique of colonial power structures to an in-depth exploration of cultural hybridity and identity. In this process, the „three musketeers“ of postcolonialism—Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Homi K. Bhabha—emerged as representative scholars, laying the core foundation of postcolonial theory and providing crucial theoretical tools for understanding the power structures and cultural dynamics in a postcolonial context.

„Orientalism“ is a key concept proposed by Edward Said in his seminal work *Orientalism*. Said argues that Orientalism refers to a complex framework that involves the systematic study and academic investigation of the East. Furthermore, Orientalism constructs prejudiced images, fantasies, and stereotypes about the Orient, deliberately crafted to legitimize and support the political domination of the East by the West[5]. The West constructed its imagination of the “Orient” through a binary opposition framework. Based on this framework, the Orient is characterized as ignorant, backward, and despotic, while the West is portrayed as the embodiment of reason, civilization, and democracy. Said's theory of Orientalism profoundly reveals the close connection between knowledge and power, analyzing how the West consolidates its global dominance through the production, dissemination, and expression of knowledge. This systematic „othering“ of the Orient by the West is not merely a cultural construction of stereotypes but also a power operation designed to maintain Western political, economic, and cultural control over the East.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is best known for her exploration of the question „Can the Subaltern Speak?“ Spivak argues that in the colonial context, it is only the colonizers

who truly hold discursive power; the subalterns are not incapable of speaking, but they are unable to make their own voices heard[6]. Although scholars and intellectuals may attempt to speak on behalf of the subalterns, this representation is often distorted by Western academic frameworks, further marginalizing or misrepresenting the voices of the subalterns. Spivak also critiques the Western-dominated system of knowledge production, arguing that Western constructions of knowledge about the East and the colonies are in fact a continuation of cultural imperialism. Drawing on Foucault's theory of knowledge and power, Spivak contends that knowledge is not neutral but is a tool serving specific power structures. The knowledge produced in Western academic discourses about the Orient, the colonies, and the „other“ is essentially a tool for the West to control, exploit, and marginalize these regions and peoples.

Homi K. Bhabha introduced concepts such as „cultural hybridity“ and the „Third Space.“ Bhabha argues that colonial encounters lead to the intermingling and blending of different cultures, resulting in a new cultural identity that is neither entirely that of the colonizer nor the colonized, and produce a fluid cultural space—the „Third Space.“ In this space, cultural differences are continually negotiated, resulting in the tensions characteristic of boundary existence[7]. In the Third Space, different cultural elements influence, collide, and reassemble, challenging traditional cultural boundaries and fixed identities, and creating new meanings and identities. This space not only breaks down traditional binary oppositions but also serves as a site for power struggles and cultural identity construction, providing marginalized groups with opportunities to voice their perspectives. In the Third Space, underprivileged cultures receive the attention they deserve, and cultural differences are protected and viewed as positive cultural exchange[8]. Bhabha's theory profoundly reveals the complexities of postcolonial culture, challenges Western-centric narratives, and illustrates the dynamism and diversity of cultural identity in the postcolonial era under the backdrop of globalization. It also fosters a deeper understanding of cultural hybridity and cross-cultural exchange.

3. An Analysis of the Gains and Losses in the Construction of Chinese Discourse in the „Third Space“

The previous sections have discussed the development of postcolonial theory and its profound influence on the dimensions of culture and power relations. Based on this theoretical background, the following section will focus on the specific case of the English translation of *From the*

Soil—The Foundations of Chinese Society, analyzing in-depth how Chinese discourse is constructed within Homi Bhabha's concept of the „Third Space“—a dynamic space where cultures intersect and blend. Specifically, it will explore how the translation successfully represents and disseminates Chinese culture, while also identifying instances where cultural distortions and errors occur during the process.

3.1 The Successes in Constructing Chinese Discourse in the „Third Space“

3.1.1 Multiple Translations of a Single Term

The phenomenon of multiple translations for a single term is common in translation, arising from cultural differences, contextual changes, and the translator's subjective choices. However, the fundamental reason lies in the polysemy of the source language terms[9-10]. In the English translation of *From the Soil—The Foundations of Chinese Society*, some terms with rich cultural connotations in the original Chinese are difficult to find direct equivalents for in the target language. Therefore, the translator adopts the strategy of „multiple translations for a single term,“ a method that conveys the cultural depth of the original text and creates new pathways for understanding Chinese culture through different expressions in the target language.

„Xiangtu“ (乡土) is a key term throughout the book. In Chinese, it generally refers to the culture, customs, and lifestyle closely related to rural life. This word encompasses not only the geographic rural areas but also specific cultural connotations and emotional expressions, reflecting the close relationship between people, nature, land, and traditional ways of life. In translating „xiangtu,“ the translator employs the strategy of multiple translations for a single term, providing multi-layered expressions in the target language that convey the richness of Chinese discourse. For example:

① ST: 乡土中国

TT: *From the Soil—The Foundations of Chinese Society*

② ST: 从基层上看去, 中国社会是乡土性的。

TT: Chinese society is fundamentally rural.

The first example is the translation of the book title. The translator explains in the preface that translating „xiangtu Zhongguo“ as „rural China“ is inaccurate. Although „xiang“ means „rural“ and „tu“ means „soil,“ „xiangtu“ refers to „one's native soil or home village,“ carrying a sense of intimacy. Translating it as „From the Soil“ emphasizes the connection between „soil“ and Chinese society, presenting the cultural foundation of „xiangtu“ to the target readers. The second example uses the word „rural“ to directly convey the rural nature of Chinese society, as it accurately captures the meaning in the given context.

The translation of „tuqi“ (土气) also adopts this strategy.

③ ST: 我们说乡下人土气

TT: We often say that country people are figuratively as well as literally “soiled” (tuqi).

④ ST: 而种地的人却搬不动地，长在土里的庄稼行动不得，侍候庄稼的老农也因之像是半身插入了土里，土气是因为不流动而发生的。

TT: ... but farmers cannot move their land or the crops they grow. Always waiting for their crops to mature, those old farmers seem to have planted half their own bodies into the soil; it is this inability to move that causes farmers to appear so backward and sedentary.

In the first instance, „soiled (tuqi)“ conveys the literal connection between „tuqi“ and soil, emphasizing the close ties between rural life and the land. In the second example, it points to the extended meaning of backwardness and stubbornness due to environmental constraints.

This method of multiple translations of a single term creates new paths for understanding culturally rich Chinese terms in the target language, allowing the translator to successfully present Chinese discourse in a more comprehensive manner within the Third Space.

3.1.2 Transliteration with Paraphrasing

When dealing with words, phrases or sentences with strong Chinese cultural characteristics, the translator often chooses a combination of transliteration and explanation to address the challenges posed by cultural differences[10]. In the translation of *From the Soil—The Foundations of Chinese Society*, the translator uses a combination of transliteration and paraphrasing. This approach not only allows for the simultaneous transmission of culture in both sound and meaning, but preserves the cultural features of the Chinese language to a great extent and enables target readers to appreciate the charm of Chinese culture. This is a reflection of cultural confidence and helps promote the spread of Chinese discourse [11]. For example, at the word level:

⑤ ST: 向另一路线推是朋友，相配的是忠信。

TT: An additional route out from the self is through friends. The ethical values that match friendship are loyalty (zhong) and sincerity (xin).

In this example, the combination of transliteration and paraphrasing maintains a close interaction between Chinese and English while also allowing Chinese culture to be present. The term „zhong“ has rich meanings in Chinese culture, like „sincerity,“ „loyalty“ and so on. By using this strategy, the translator reminds target readers that the meaning of the Chinese characters in parentheses is the source of the interpretation, preserving the original cultural essence and contributing to the construction of Chinese discourse.

At the phrase level:

⑥ ST: 差序格局

TT: chaxugeju: the differential mode of association

The concept of „chaxugeju“ holds unique cultural and structural significance in Chinese sociology. Direct translation into English would result in the loss of cultural connotations. By rendering it as „chaxugeju: the differential mode of association,“ the translator retains the pinyin form, allowing it to serve as a cross-cultural symbol in the translation. Simultaneously, the English explanation helps target readers understand this complex concept of social structure. This strategy effectively fosters the construction of Chinese discourse and the dissemination of Chinese culture within the Third Space.

At the sentence level:

⑦ ST: “不知老之将至”就是描写“忘时”的生活。

TT: The saying “We act as if we never know that old age is coming” (bu zhi lao zhi jiang zhi) describes a life in which we forget time.

This widely known Chinese saying is not only be explained in English, conveying the contemplation of life and the passage of time, but also retains the Chinese reading with pinyin in translation. This preserves the uniqueness of Chinese culture while making it easy to understand and disseminate, allowing Chinese discourse to hold its place in the target culture.

The combination of transliteration and paraphrasing allows the construction of Chinese discourse within the Third Space. Pinyin, as a cultural symbol, retains the cultural characteristics of Chinese, while the English explanations provide target readers with a tool for understanding cultural symbols, facilitating cross-cultural transmission of Chinese culture.

3.1.3 Constructing „China English“

“China English is based on standard English, used to express the unique elements of Chinese society and culture, free from interference and influence of the mother tongue, entering English communication through transliteration, borrowing, and semantic regeneration, thus creating words, phrases, and texts with Chinese characteristics”[12]. In the translation of *From the Soil—The Foundations of Chinese Society*, the translator employs the strategy of constructing China English, preserving Chinese-specific culture while creating new pathways of expression in the target culture. This is a key means by which Chinese discourse gains new vitality in cross-cultural communication, effectively realizing the construction of Chinese discourse in the Third Space. For example, the translation of “wenmang” (文盲):

⑧ ST: 我们称之为“文盲”，意思是白生了眼睛，连字都不识。

TT: They are illiterate, or what we call “character blind.” Their eyes cannot even recognize one Chinese character.

„Wenmang“ is typically translated as „illiteracy,“ but rendering it as „character blind,“ directly corresponding to Chinese characters, preserves the exotic flavor of the original Chinese term creatively. This translation reflects the metaphorical meaning of „blind“ and uses the word „character“ to convey the unique cultural symbol of Chinese characters. This translation creates a new expression in the target language, allowing Chinese discourse to be heard in the Third Space.

Another example of translating Chinese idioms:

⑨ ST: 在都市社会里有名人，乡土社会里是“人怕出名，猪怕壮”。

TT: In urban society, there are celebrities; but in rural society, as the saying goes, “People fear becoming famous just as pigs fear becoming fat.”

In traditional Chinese culture, a fat pig symbolizes impending slaughter, reflecting the rural desire for a stable life. The translator directly translates „人怕出名，猪怕壮“ to convey a new cultural expression to English-speaking audiences. This translation constructs a form of English with distinct Chinese characteristics, providing the target readers with a new way to understand the uniqueness of Chinese culture. Other examples include translations of idioms like “无法无天” (without laws and without heaven), “天高皇帝远” (Heaven is high and the emperor is far away), and so on.

By constructing China English, the translator creates a new cultural expression space in the target language, creatively reconstructing Chinese culture in the Third Space and allowing these expressions rich with Chinese cultural connotations to be constructed and disseminated.

3.1.4 Annotation

Annotation is a common translation strategy. In the English translation of *From the Soil—The Foundations of Chinese Society*, the translator uses annotations to provide necessary cultural background information for target readers, creating a cross-cultural space that retains the cultural depth of the original text while making it easy to understand. This promotes the construction of Chinese discourse. The following example uses annotation to supplement cultural background knowledge:

⑩ ST: 但是“无法”并不影响这社会的秩序，因为乡土社会是“礼治”的社会。

TT: However, the absence of laws does not affect social order, because rural society is ruled by rituals.

Annotation: The Chinese term *li* has numerous meanings, including rites, ritual, and etiquette. We use the word ritual to translate the term, but in English “ritual” has a pejorative meaning that it does not have in Chinese.

By adding annotation to supplement cultural background knowledge, the translator compares the connotations of *li* in Chinese context and the similar words in English, and highlights the uniqueness of Chinese culture in the Third Space, helping readers understand the text while enabling the construction and transmission of Chinese discourse in the target culture.

3.2 The Failure in Constructing Chinese Discourse in the „Third Space“

3.2.1 Inappropriate Omission

The „Third Space“ theory requires the translator to retain the uniqueness of the source culture while ensuring that the target readers can understand and accept the cultural content. However, in the translation of *From the Soil—The Foundations of Chinese Society*, some inappropriate omissions of translation may weaken the meaning of the source culture, leading to an incomplete cultural exchange in the Third Space and affecting the effective construction and transmission of Chinese discourse. For example:

⑪ ST: 我们永远在削足适履，使感觉敏锐的人怨恨语言的束缚。李长吉要在这束缚中去求比较切近的表达，难怪他要呕尽心血了。

TT: We always trim the toes to fit the shoes. Language constrains what can be felt and expressed, and sensitive people often resent that.

In the original Chinese text, Fei Xiaotong cites the example of Li Changji (Li He), a famous poet of the Tang dynasty known for his imaginative works. His struggles with the limitations of language in expressing himself are highlighted in this example. The omitted reference not only adds literary depth to the original text but also provides readers with emotional resonance, making the discussion of the limitations of language more concrete and vivid. Although this omission may help target readers understand the text more easily, it weakens the expressive function of the original text and removes elements of significant cultural value.

Here is another example. When the original text emphasizes that the constraints of *li* on individual behavior are stronger than those of morality, it cites the example of “Zengzi Changing His Mat” to highlight the high consciousness and initiative in behavior influenced by *li*. However, this reference is also omitted, resulting in a same loss of the expressive function and cultural dissemination.

Omission in translation under the Third Space context may simplify the text to make it easier for the target readers to understand. However, inappropriate omission can result in a loss of cultural connotations, weakening the influence of Chinese culture in the target culture and the

construction of Chinese discourse in the Third Space.

3.2.2 Factual Errors

The act of translation occurs within the specific cultural context of the original text, and the translator, as an intermediary, helps the target audience understand this cultural context[13]. Therefore, culture plays a significant role in translation. The Third Space is intended to be a place of cultural interaction, but when mistranslations occur, cultural exchange in the Third Space can be distorted, affecting the target audience's understanding of Chinese culture. For example:

⑫ ST: 子曰：“为政以德，譬如北辰，居其所，而众星拱之。”

TT: Confucius wrote, “A ruler who exercises government by means of his virtue is like the North Star, which makes all the other stars surround it.”

The original Chinese text is from *The Analects*, a classic that records the sayings and actions of Confucius and his disciples, emphasizing Confucius' moral philosophy and governance principles. Confucius did not write this statement; it was recorded by his disciples. Thus, this phrase should be understood as something Confucius said, not something he wrote. This factual error appears multiple times in the text and may lead target culture readers to misunderstand Chinese history and culture, such as mistakenly believing that *The Analects* was written by Confucius himself. The translator fails to accurately convey the original cultural information in the Third Space, leading to cultural misunderstandings and distortions that hinder the construction of correct Chinese discourse.

3.2.3 Incorrect Emotional Connotations of Certain Terms

In the „Third Space“ theory, source culture and target culture interact and blend, creating new cultural meanings in a dynamic space. The emotional connotations of terms play a key role in this process, as they not only affect the emotional and attitudinal responses of target readers but also deeply influence the transmission of cultural connotations. In the book, the translator's choices for the translation of „乡下人“ (people living in the countryside) and „乡下朋友“ (friends living in the countryside) are incorrect:

⑬ ST: 乡下人在马路上听见背后汽车连续地按喇叭，慌了手脚，东避也不是，西躲又不是。

TT: When peasants, walking in the middle of a road, hear a car honking behind them, they become so nervous that they simply do not know which way to jump.

⑭ ST: 旁边的乡下朋友，虽然没有啐她一口，但是微微一笑，也不妨译作“笨蛋”。

TT: The peasant standing beside her did not spit at her

even once, but gave her a little smile, which an astute observer might have interpreted as a reaction to her stupidity.

The word „peasant“ in Western cultural contexts often carries negative socioeconomic connotations, typically associated with poverty, ignorance, and backwardness. This word choice adds a negative evaluation to the rural residents described in the original text, distorting the cultural background and emotional connotations embedded in the original. This misrepresentation has a direct negative impact on the construction of Chinese discourse in the Third Space.

4. Conclusion

In summarizing the construction of Chinese discourse in the English translation of *From the Soil—The Foundations of Chinese Society*, the concept of the „Third Space“ from postcolonial theory provides a powerful framework for understanding and analysis. The translator successfully reproduces the rich connotations of Chinese culture in the target culture through multiple strategies, including multiple translations for single terms, a combination of transliteration and paraphrasing, the construction of China English, and the use of annotations. These methods not only offer target readers new pathways to understand Chinese culture but also enhance the influence of Chinese discourse in a global context. However, there are still limitations in the cultural transmission process. Inappropriate omissions, factual errors, and misjudgments regarding the emotional connotations of terms may weaken, lose, or distort certain key cultural meanings, thereby reducing the expressiveness and impact of Chinese discourse in the target culture.

From a postcolonial perspective, the successes and shortcomings of the English translation of *From the Soil—The Foundations of Chinese Society* in constructing the „Third Space“ reflect the complexity and multidimensionality of cultural exchange and discourse construction in translation practice. On one side, the translator employs cultural adaptation strategies to break down traditional cultural hegemony, achieving an equal dialogue between Chinese and Western cultures. On the other side, this dialogue still has limitations in certain aspects, failing to completely avoid phenomena of cultural silencing and distortion. In cross-cultural translation practice, effectively constructing Chinese discourse remains a goal that translators must strive for.

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